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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 000669

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SUBJECT: A MONTH TO THE FLEMISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS: STATUS
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Classified By: Political Economic Counselor Richard Eason for reasons 1
.4 B & D.

11. (C) Summary: The Flemish regional elections will be held on June 7, along with the European Parliament Elections. Though PM Van Rompuy has said regional elections do not affect the federal government, all major national political decisions have been put on hold until after the regional elections. It is unclear which party will be the front runner on June 7, but the most likely outcome is another Christian Democrat (CD&V), Liberal (OpenVLD), and Socialist (sp.a) regional government headed by current OpenVLD Flemish Minister-President Kris Peeters. If it performs well, the pro-Flemish independence New Flemish Alliance (NVA) could join the coalition. The third possibility is a center-right coalition: CD&V, OpenVLD, NVA, and the newer center-right Lijst DeDecker (LDD). LDD is competing in the regional elections for the first time, and is the major wild-card in the race. Regional election results often send a signal to the federal government on its level of support and possibly foreshadow the next federal election. If a status quo Flemish government forms after June 7, there is likely to be minimal impact at the national level where the CD&V and OpenVLD represent Flanders. If other parties perform very well, a reconfiguration of ministries at the national level or even early elections could be coming. End Summary.

Introduction

12. (U) The Flemish regional elections on June 7 will determine the proportion of the 124 seats received by each of the Flemish parties in the Flemish Parliament. The current Flemish government is led by the CD&V and Minister-President Kris Peeters in coalition with OpenVLD and sp.a. These three parties currently hold a majority of sixty-two percent of the seats, allotted after the 2004 regional election. This is not equivalent to the federal parliament, where the sp.a is not part of the government and the CD&V and OpenVLD are the only Flemish parties in the majority.

Recent Polls and LDD

13. (U) March polls show a weakening of the three major parties and the possibility that LDD or other third parties could do quite well. Polls taken by the Flemish Daily the Standaard and francophone La Libre Belgique in March found the following level of support for Flemish parties:

PARTY DE STANDAARD	LA LIBRE BELGIQUE
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CD&V 20.5	
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	21.9
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OpenVLD	19.3	16.3
sp.a	14.4	13.7
LDD	11.8	16.6
NVA	10.1	6.5
Groen (Greens)	7.3	6.6

Possible Configurations

14. (C) Depending on the June 7 results, the current three party CD&V-OpenVLD-sp.a coalition is likely to renegotiate a slim to stable majority (51 percent to 55 percent). Another possibility is the traditional three plus a smaller party, with NVA the most likely candidate, due to its previous electoral cooperation with the CD&V. (Note: CD&V and NVA participated in an electoral CD&V-NVA cartel in the 2004 regional and 2007 national elections, before NVA withdrew on July 15, 2008 over a failure to achieve state reform at the federal level. End Note.) A center-right coalition of CD&V-OpenVLD-LDD-NVA is another possible configuration; a center-right variation of CD&V-OpenVLD-NVA could work if the two larger parties scored above twenty percent and NVA were to receive eight to ten percent.

Socialist Indecision and OpenVLD-LDD Histrionics

15. (C) The task of negotiating a majority, most likely led by the CD&V, is complicated by two key uncertainties: sp.a indecision and the intense rivalry between OpenVLD and LDD, a rivalry heating up at the moment. The party leaders of sp.a are not committed to participating in regional government;

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many of the more radical members would like to go into opposition at the regional level as they have done at the federal level and retool the party's message (reftel). A May 8 discussion between Pol-Econ Couns and sp.a Senator Marleen Temmerman confirmed this discussion was ongoing. The pragmatic Temmerman thought going into opposition at the national level was the wrong decision, but hinted that many in her party prefer opposition at both levels of government.

16. (C) The OpenVLD and LDD have been attacking each other aggressively in the media, with federal Deputy PM and FM De Gucht saying the OpenVLD would not join a government with LDD. The press acrimony between the OpenVLD leadership and LDD leader Jean-Marie Dedecker is particularly tense because Dedecker left the OpenVLD several years ago to begin his own rival party that has drawn many OpenVLD politicians and voters. The histrionics between the two parties rose to a new level in late April and early May. Dedecker hired a private investigator who was discovered following OpenVLD leaders looking for scandal. The Flemish press the week of May 4 focused on the back bench party switcher Dirk Vijnk who left LDD for OpenVLD, only to return to LDD. OpenVLD party leader Bart Somers was forced to publicly apologize for writing a letter promising Vijnk a seat in parliament through 2015 if he left LDD for good. Though these two parties seem to have a particularly strong rivalry prior to the election, they could decide that cooperating after June 7 is politically expedient.

Comment--Regional Elections and the Federal Government

17. (C) Though PM Van Rompuy has said regional elections are purely regional affairs, the election could deliver a critique of the national government where the CD&V and OpenVLD represent Flanders alone. If those two parties do well, they can likely continue at the national level with their ministerial portfolios intact. If the Socialists do very well at the regional level, their fortunes turning, perhaps they may be inclined to remain part of the status quo regional majority, and even consider asking to rejoin the federal coalition. If LDD or NVA do well, and a center right

coalition forms, then it is unlikely the francophone parties would agree to a national coalition with what many francophones consider radical Flemish parties. There is always the chance that a weak showing by the CD&V and OpenVLD could indicate a lack of confidence in the national government and force new national elections, but few party leaders and fewer Belgians are interested in another long period without a federal government.

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